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Title : Post release monitoring of juvenile harp seals (Phoca groenlandica) released in New York waters

Category : Strandings

Student :

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Abstract : The increase in strandings of pinnipeds in New York waters has been attributed to arctic species, mainly the harp seal (Phoca groenlandica). Since 1996 The Riverhead Foundation for Marine Research and Preservation has recovered 944 marine mammals, of these recoveries 84% (n = 791) were pinnipeds consisting of five species: 436 harp (Phoca groenlandica), 191 harbor (Phoca vitulina), 93 gray (Halichoerus grypus), 59 hooded (Cystophora cristata), 1 ringed (Phoca hispida)and 14 unidentified. The survivorship of stranded pinnipeds has increased from 50 % in 1996 to 74 % in 2003. To evaluate rehabilitation success and test the hypothesis that rehabilitated juvenile harp seals (P. groenlandica) return to their native waters and become viable members of the population. Satellite, flipper and hat tags were used to monitor post release movements. Unfortunately few flipper tags were recovered or observed on healthy animals. Due to tag size and placement, flipper tags are not visible when the animal is in the water. Since 2001, three flipper tags were returned from harp seals taken in Canadian waters. In 2001 a flipper tag was recovered from an animal taken in a hunt in Cumberland Sound, Canada. This animal traveled a straight line distance of 2500 miles in 78 days. To obtain a more in-depth understanding of post release movements, four satellite (SPOT-2)position only tags were deployed on rehabilitated juvenile harp seals released in New York waters. These results suggest that rehabilitated juvenile harp seals spend little time in near shore waters once released and move north to native waters to become viable members of the population. In addition tag return data suggest that there is not a need to transport these stranded animals northward for release as it gets late in the season.